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SEC Clergy Seize the Dinner

SEC Clergy "Seize the Dinner" | Prior to Annual Meeting

By Kathy Clark

On the Friday prior to this year's Annual Meeting, clergy and their partners or spouses from throughout the Southeast Conference came together for an evening of fellowship, relationship building, and directed conversation over dinner. ***We came. We ate. We conversed.*** For the first time in several years, clergy from all over the Southeast Conference gathered for a fellowship event at the Carpe Diem Restaurant in Atlanta. Nearly 50 clergy and significant others seized this opportunity to share dinner and conversation with colleagues. The room was full, the food was good and fellowship was vibrant.

The inspiration for this event came from the organizers, pastors Susannah Davis of Kirkwood UCC, Atlanta and John Gill of Church of the Savior, Knoxville. Out of their desire to connect with fellow clergy, an idea was born that we hope will gather momentum and become the first of many opportunities for fostering stronger relationships among the ministers of the SEC, as well as offering more opportunities for continuing formation for their ministries.



What an evening - Seizing some time with colleagues.

Colleagues I've known awhile and colleagues I met that Friday night! And more than that, thankfully--friends met and friendships deepened. It was good to be together--really good. The food was marvelous and the company was simply delightful.

*Conversations connecting people at different tables--different states--different areas of ministry, drawing us closer--that we all may be one! **Let's do it again y'all.** -- Susannah Davis*

One of the areas that the Ministry Issues Project emphasizes is the need for continuing education and ongoing formation among authorized ministers in the United Church of Christ. In our efforts to work with Members in Discernment, identifying gifts, discerning call, and preparing them for authorization, we often neglect the important notions of lifelong learning and continuing professional development, as if authorization is an end in itself. In the Southeast Conference, we would like to change expectations both among authorized ministers and the church as a whole so that these priorities become a matter of fact and not just a vision of the way things ought to be. A generous grant from the Brown Foundation helped make the evening possible.

All professions require continuing education so that professionals can keep up with new developments in their fields

and engage in best practices for the good of those whom they serve. This is as important to ministers and the church as it is to doctors and their patients. In these times, when ministers are under stress because of distresses within church and society, it becomes even more important. This is true for both full-time and part-time authorized ministers. In the Southeast Conference, more than 50% of our churches are pastored by bi-vocational ministers. These individuals are subject to the demands of both ministry and other professions, with ministry often being conducted as a part-time "second job" during one's "leisure" time. A large percentage of our authorized ministers serve in settings other than the local church and report a sense of disconnection with their fellow UCC clergy. New Church Start pastors and church developers also describe a sense of isolation in their ministries. Our geography and demographics (53 churches in five states) preclude many of our ministers from meeting with one another on a regular basis for fellowship and mutual support, much less for continuing education and professional development.

The most popular idea was holding local, informal gatherings for dinner, but there was also significant interest in ongoing support or study groups and an annual retreat for fellowship and support. Personally, I like the suggestion for "theological beach getaways," but "clergy bingo" might be more feasible.

*Thanks to all who came and special thanks to the Brown Foundation for supporting this event. We hope it will be the first of many and we hope to see you - or your pastor, or staff or chaplain - there! **Let's do it again, y'all, indeed!** -- John Gill*

And so we gathered to begin to talk with one another about these needs and to imagine opportunities to meet them in creative ways. Both the enthusiasm for this gathering and the results of a survey carried out through a tongue-in-cheek "All God's Children's Menu" show a high level of interest in building relationships among UCC clergy in the Southeast Conference. Everyone who responded to the survey indicated a strong interest in participating in events designed to provide support and build connections between clergy (with nearly 60% saying it ranked a 10 on a scale of 10). We have an enthusiastic beginning and an emerging vision for seizing more opportunities like this in the future.

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